


THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG PREADOLESCENTS: HABITS AND CONSEQUENCES

L'UTILIZZO DEI SOCIAL MEDIA TRA I PREADOLESCENTI: ABITUDINI E CONSEGUENZE

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of social media among preadolescents has been found to impact body satisfaction and lead to the development of dualism between real and virtual identities. A sample of 2378 Italian preadolescents (Mage= 12.02 years, SD= 0.82) was recruited to investigate this issue. The results showed that using filters/apps to alter physical appearance and image-mediated interactions with peers and celebrities/influencers were negatively associated with body satisfaction.

L'incremento dell'uso dei social media tra i preadolescenti è stato dimostrato avere un impatto sulla soddisfazione corporea, causando una forma di dualismo tra identità virtuale e reale. Per approfondire questo tema, un campione di 2378 preadolescenti italiani (Mage= 12.02 years, SD= 0.82) è stato reclutato. I risultati hanno mostrato che l'utilizzo dei filtri e delle app per alterare l'aspetto fisico e l'interazione tra pari e celebrità/influencer basate sulle immagini sono associate negativamente con la soddisfazione corporea.

KEYWORDS

preadolescents, body image, social media, dualism
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Introduction

Although there is a growing literature on social media's effects on body image concerns and the well-being of adolescents and young adults (Evans et al., 2017; Jarman et al., 2021), more research should be done on early adolescence. Furthermore, there is a gap in theoretically driven research on the effects of the constant manipulation and dissemination of altered copies of one's body and the consequences of frequent exposure to modified bodies that are spread through social media, reflecting unrealistic sociocultural standards that are impossible to attain (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023).

Filter-related technological development has exacerbated this phenomenon, especially among the youngest generation. Preadolescents are, in fact, avid social media users, despite existing limits, age verification mechanisms and parental consent tools (Rideout, 2022; Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023). Considering the wide variety of content available through social media and the low level of control and children's protection, they can be exposed to risks such as unsuitable content, bullying, grooming, child sexual abuse, body shaming or radicalisation. Such age-inappropriate content is within easy reach and, often, without the direct control of the adults that could mitigate the adverse effects (Fardouly, 2018).

In addition, because of the constant exposition to altered copies of bodies representing unrealistic beauty standards, preadolescents may feel dissatisfied with their bodies and experience low self-esteem, which can affect their confidence and overall well-being. Furthermore, they may feel pressure to restrict their food intake, over-exercise, or engage in other unhealthy behaviours to attain the "perfect" body (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023). A part of the scientific literature (Van der Berg et al., 2007; Mc Lean et al., 2016) has also shown a link between the use of social media and depression and anxiety, as preadolescents may feel overwhelmed by the pressure to look like the images that can be seen through the media. This aspect may also lead to avoiding social activities and interactions.

Given the increasing social media usage among preadolescents and the continued technological development in this area, further examining the relationship between preadolescents and social media is imperative. To investigate the risks associated with the extensive use of appearance-focused social media, a research study was conducted involving a sample of 2378 Italian preadolescents.

1. Body image, social media, and preadolescence

The concept of body image can be defined as the simultaneous perception of oneself and one's sense of being in the world. It is an active construction process which involves the organisation of sensory experiences and self-perception through the body (Merleau Ponty, 2013; Sartre, 2014).

Body image is typically categorised into four primary components: global subjective satisfaction, affective distress regarding appearance (such as stress, anxiety, or discomfort), cognitive aspects of body image, and behavioural aspects, which include avoiding situations that elicit concerns (Cash & Smolak, 2012). It is important to note that all forms of consciousness and bodily experiences are subjectively related to worldly relations in which the body is active, constantly perceiving, and in connection to the world (Merleau Ponty, 2013).

In modern times, the interaction between individuals and technological artefacts is changing the role of the body, its relationship with the environment and the cognition of one's body image. Individuals increasingly engage with the environment through the mediation of screens and other interfaces rather than through direct physical contact. This has significant implications for how individuals perceive and interact with their bodies and their understanding of their relationship to the physical world.

Technology is also changing their understanding of embodiment. Today, the body is seen more as a tool for interacting with the world than as an integral part of the lived experience. This can lead to a sense of detachment from the physical selves and disconnection from the physical environment around the individuals, especially among the young (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023). Furthermore, the emergence of social media and other online platforms, coupled with their early adoption by children and preadolescents, heightens the likelihood of exposure to idealised images of the body. This can ultimately result in feelings of insecurity and anxiety surrounding physical appearance. Finally, digital technologies like virtual and augmented reality can blur the lines between physical selves and digital representations, leading to confusion and disorientation (Turkle, S. 2011).

All this poses a problem for self-identification and self-evaluation, especially during preadolescence, when individuals experience significant physical, cognitive, and social changes (Eccles, 1999). The high investment in time spent on social media suggests that this extensive use may influence preadolescents' self-evaluation, including body satisfaction, during a period in which the body image is formed. A growing body of research (see Holland & Tiggerman, 2016) shows that excessive investment in the body is a precursor to a full range of unhealthy behaviours and

body concerns such as dieting, social anxiety, inactive lifestyles, and related behaviours that are risk factors for chronic body image problems.

2. A study among Italian preadolescents

A convenience sample of 2378 Italian preadolescents aged 11-13 ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.02$ years, $SD = 0.82$) was investigated. It is important to note that while the study utilised a convenience sampling approach, it allowed participants from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations to be included. This ensured that a wide range of perspectives and experiences were represented in the data collected. While the findings may not be generalisable to the broader population, they provide valuable insights into the relationship between social media, body representation, and body image in this specific sample. The study employed a data collection strategy that utilised two anonymous and self-administered questionnaires to investigate various aspects related to social media use, body representation, and body image. Specifically, the first questionnaire was designed to collect information on social media use, including its typology, intensity, image-based usage, and type of profiles (public/private). The second questionnaire assessed the relationship between natural and virtual bodies and the participant's perception of their own bodies. To evaluate the participants' Desired Body Image (DBI) and Perceived Body Image (PBI), the study used the Body Figure Rating scale (BFR). The BFR was used compared to their Actual Body Size (ABS) (Hoelsher 2003). Additionally, the study adopted an adapted version of the Instagram Image Activity Scale (IIAS) and the Instagram Appearance Comparison Scale – IACS (di Gesto et al., 2020) to explore the combined influence of social media use and peer factors on body image. These measures aimed to assess the extent to which individuals engage in activities related to body image on Instagram and how they compare their appearance to others on the platform.

Descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlation and regression analyses, were used to analyse the collected data. The statistical analyses aimed to identify patterns and associations between the study variables and provide evidence to support the research hypotheses. In particular, the study sought to describe and analyse three different types of engagement. The first type (*virtual me*) was related to all the activities preadolescents implement to build a virtual identity through social media, such as posting pictures and videos about themselves or checking the number of likes and visualising their stories (social recognition). The second type (*virtual peers*) was related to social interactions and the comparison with peers through social media. It can have a double component: a passive interaction concerning the visualisation of images, videos, stories, etc., without any reciprocal

action, and an active interaction with direct exchanges with peers through posts, comments, etc. Finally, the last type was related to interacting with celebrities and famous influencers (*virtual VIP*).

Finally, the study sought to analyse the potential conflict between the real body, the physical element everyone owns and feels, and the virtual body, i.e., the digital representation built and spread through social media. This new variable was called: *dualism*.

3. Results: how do preadolescents use social media, and what are the effects

Since data were not normally distributed, non-parametric analyses were conducted for descriptive statistics. Generally, the extent of missing data was moderate, ranging from 0 to 10%. Regarding the use of social media, 99% (n= 2355) of the respondents reported browsing social media daily. Instagram and TikTok resulted as the most used platforms, along with WhatsApp as a multiplatform messaging app for sharing pictures and videos. Preadolescents self-reported spending on social media two or more hours per day in 44.20% of the cases (n=1046). Participants identified as male in 52.81% (n=1255) of the cases; and female in 47.19% (n=1122).

The statistical analysis indicated an excellent model fit. The scaled chi-square was $\chi^2(31) = 233.57$ ($p < 0.001$, CFI= 0.92, SRMR= 0.06). The model had an acceptable fit based on the obtained RMSEA point estimation (=0.11) and the 90% confidence interval (=0.10, 0.12). Generally, the findings supported a direct association between social media engagement and body satisfaction via the attitude to alter one's body image and dualism. Descriptive information and zero-order Spearman correlations between all variables are presented in Table 1.

The attitude to post videos and pictures about themselves (*virtual me active*) was associated with the attitude to alter one's physical appearance and dualism. The use of social media to gain social recognition (*virtual me recognition*) was also associated with the attitude to alter one's physical appearance and dualism. Active and passive interaction with peers through social media were associated with the attitude to alter one's physical appearance and dualism. Finally, the interaction with celebrities/influences (*virtual VIP*) was associated with the attitude to alter one's physical appearance and dualism.

	M (SD)	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Virtual me active	1.94 (0.75)	1-4							
2 Virtual Me social recognition	1.90 (0.82)	1-4	0.61***						
3 Virtual peers active	2.28 (0.86)	1-4	0.65***	0.55***					
4 Virtual peers passive	2.30 (0.66)	1-4	0.53***	0.51***	0.68***				
5 Virtual Vip	2.85 (0.91)	1-4	0.28***	0.28***	0.41***	0.41***			
6 Physical appearance alteration	1.71 (0.92)	1-4	0.47***	0.37***	0.39***	0.36***	0.19**		
7 Dualism	1.59 (0.38)	1-3	0.43***	0.37***	0.40***	0.37***	0.23***	0.36***	
8 Body satisfaction	2.67 (0.73)	1-4	-0.06*	-0.06*	-0.1***	-0.10**	-0.11**	-0.05*	0.21***

Table 1. Means, standard deviation, and zero-order Spearman correlation - full sample. (* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$).

Specifically, the study found a significant positive association between the type of social media engagement and individuals' attitudes towards altering their physical appearance. Furthermore, the type of social media engagement was positively associated with a variable referred to as dualism, which indicates a tendency to dichotomise the real and virtual body.

In contrast, the study found a significant negative association between the interaction with peers (both active and passive - variables 3-4) as well as with celebrities/influencers (variable 5) and both body satisfaction (variable 8) and the

variable called dualism (variable 7). These findings suggest that social media engagement, particularly with certain types of content, may harm individuals' body image and self-perception.

4. A new form of dualism

Today, the use of image-based social media is massive among preadolescents. A considerable investment of time and energy is devoted to creating a solid virtual reputation and building body representations aligned with the dominant socio-cultural models. The results showed that using filters and dedicated apps to alter one's physical appearance to build a better reputation on social media, along with image-mediated interaction with peers and celebrities/influencers, is negatively associated with body satisfaction. It also represents the ground for the emergence of a new form of dualism between the real and the virtual body.

While using social media, preadolescents focus more on images and visual interactions (based on pictures, videos, etc.). An inclination to distinguish between the body that the individual owns and recognises as a given of nature, the tangible part of corporeality, and the virtual representation proposed through social media are widespread. The body is seen more as a raw model that must be adapted and manipulated than as an integral part of the personal experience. The more an individual engages with social media, the more they may become detached from the physical self, which can lead to feelings of disconnection and dissociation.

Filtered images are posted, commented on, shared, etc., with filters that alter the appearance and build a more acceptable body. At the same time, engagement with peers is mediated by the constant exchange of pictures and comments about body image and appearance. The virtual representation of the body on social media is highly curated and edited, leading to unrealistic beauty standards, potentially resulting in negative body image among individuals and a conflict between the real and the virtual body. This dualism can exacerbate issues related to the negative body and reinforce societal norms related to beauty, race, gender, and body type, potentially harmful to those who do not fit within those norms.

The study showed that the constant alteration of physical appearance and the propensity to discriminate between the real and the virtual body is inversely related to body satisfaction. Thus, appearance-related feedback mediates the effect of the alteration of physical appearance in body dissatisfaction. Individuals tend to compare themselves to others they perceive to be like them in relevant domains, such as appearance. Social media facilitates such comparisons by providing access to a broad range of images and videos of individuals with desirable appearances.

Therefore, if individuals perceive themselves to be dissimilar to the images they see on social media, this may further contribute to their body dissatisfaction. In this light, creating an acceptable physical appearance image is crucial; thus, preadolescents modify their physical appearance to gain recognition and appreciation through social media.

Conclusions

The concept of a new form of dualism among preadolescents refers to separating the physical self from the virtual representation of the self proposed through social media. This detachment can lead to feelings of disconnection and dissociation from the physical body and a focus on altering and manipulating the body to fit societal norms. Urgent actions are needed to address the negative impact of appearance-related feedback on social media and its effect on body dissatisfaction. To address these issues, a multifaceted approach is necessary.

Generally, addressing the issues related to appearance-related feedback on social media and its impact on body dissatisfaction requires a multifaceted approach, including education, awareness-raising, open communication, and policy changes. Firstly, since preadolescence is a delicate phase in developing a personal identity, there is a need to promote body positivity and acceptance. Paradoxically, this can be done through social media campaigns that can easily reach a broad audience of preadolescents and that can encourage individuals to develop a positive relationship with their bodies, independent of societal norms or physical alterations.

Secondly, preadolescents must be provided with accurate and evidence-based information regarding physical alterations, their potential risks and benefits, and the impact of social media on body image. Clear communication can help prevent negative outcomes; increasing awareness of the effects of social media on body image and encouraging individuals to limit their exposure to social media or curate their feeds to include positive and diverse representations of body types can be effective in promoting positive body image.

Thirdly, in all the key contexts in which the preadolescents live (schools, cultural associations, etc.), open communication about body image concerns and social media habits must be fostered to gain insight into their thoughts and feelings and develop a healthier relationship with their bodies.

Lastly, there is an urgent need to implement policies and regulations that prevent the promotion of unhealthy body ideals or posting harmful content related to body

image on social media can also positively impact individuals' mental health and well-being.

Considering the complex nature of the phenomenon investigated, further research is required to understand better how social media engagement impacts body image, among which preadolescents this effect occurs most strongly, and under which conditions the effects come about. This research is also expected to inform interventions aimed at mitigating the negative effects of social media on preadolescent body image and improving preadolescents' well-being and mental health in an increasingly digital world.

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